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Anthropological theory and engagement: A zero-sum game?

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In recent years anthropologist colleagues in the UK have increasingly expressed a fear that an engagement with certain kinds of political issues would lead to anthropological theory being 'subsumed' by politics. Such concerns that engagement with political and social issues might damage the purity of anthropological theory are both widespread and understandable in the current context within which UK academics operate.

Part of the UK's Research Councils' definition of 'impact' is 'fostering global economic performance, and specifically the economic competitiveness of the United Kingdom, increasing the effectiveness of public services and policy'.[1] Given that many UK anthropologists are already concerned that education is increasingly being viewed as a commodity, it is no wonder that many col- leagues are suspicious of buzzwords such as 'impact' and consequently other forms of public 'engagement' more generally.

Culture as description and intervention

Whilst understandable, continuing to view engagement and theoretical advance as a kind of zero-sum game, in which prioritizing one inevitably leads to the diminution of the other, is a radical departure from many of the best examples of theoretical innovation in the history of anthropology. Far from being elaborated as the result of a splendid isolation from social engagement, some of the most profound developments of anthropological theory have come from the desire of anthropologists to engage in social issues. Indeed, as Catherine Besteman and Angelique Haugerud point out in their editorial of this journal's special issue on engaged anthropology, the discipline 'has always been public' (2013: 1).

This is particularly clear in the trajectory of cultural anthropology in the United States in the 20th century. It is fair to say that the elaboration of the 'culture concept' remains anthropology's most significant conceptual gift, not just to other academic disciplines, but to the wider world. 'Culture', in one form or another, has escaped the discipline's boundaries to become the stock-in-trade of indigenous activists, management consultants, and other academic

[1] ESRC document 'What is impact?' http://www.esrc. ac.uk/funding-and-guidance/ impact-toolkit/what-how-and- why/what-is-research-impact.aspx (accessed 3 November 2014).

disciplines such as cultural studies, and the basis for an ongoing anguished political debate in countries across the globe (Sahlins 1995: 14).

As should be well known to students of anthropology's history, 'culture' is not only the major conceptual contribution that the discipline has made in the past century, but was also put forward by the early pioneers of the discipline within the US academy in the course of an attempt to politically engage in social issues. Franz Boas, who more than any other figure is associated with the elaboration of the 'culture concept' in anthropology, was a lifelong polemicist against racism and the use of anthropology as an aid to espionage and military adventures. His development of the idea of cultural context as an intervention in a debate around how museums should display 'native' artifacts was a highly political one, discrediting as it did, dominant evolutionist narratives that placed Western material culture at the apex of the forward march of civilization.

The popularization of the 'culture concept' in the work of Boas' students Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict, continued the role of publicly engaged anthropology in the development of anthropological theory. There is no doubt that both Mead and Benedict saw their writing as being, at least in part, an intervention in a public and political debate, and in particular saw the public elaboration of the 'culture' concept as a weapon to be used in the battle against trends that were widespread in the 1930s, such as biological racism, eugenics or the assumption of the universal applicability of particular social or economic values. This intent shines through in the polemical opening chapter of Benedict's (1934) *Patterns of culture*, a book that sold in the hundreds of thousands rather than the dozens or hundreds, and that defined anthropology to a generation of educated Americans.

Indeed the trajectory of the culture concept demonstrates two tendencies that can occur with the elaboration of theoretical concepts in the crucible of socially engaged research and writing. The first is a tension between the simplification of complex and fluid processes that is sometimes necessary in order to make them easily digestible by other audiences, whether those be policymakers, activists or a wider public. The second is the ways in which, once the concepts are developed, they can be appropriated in ways that might not always sit well with their original authors' intentions.

Boas' view of culture as inherently fluid did not survive its translation into Benedict's popularization unscathed. Benedict's descriptions of culture as fixed inheritable pat- terns were perhaps more easily digestible by a mass audience and Benedict's rendering of the culture concept still provides the basis for widely popular and influential uses of anthropology to this day. Academic anthropologists are of course aware of the dangers in this depiction of culture: not only was the post-structuralist critique of culture that we have become all too familiar with since the 1980s largely based on popular expositions of culture as pattern of the kind developed by Benedict, but many of Benedict's own contemporaries, including Boas himself, felt equally compelled to critique her conception of cultural patterns for almost precisely the same reasons as the post-structuralists would half a century later (Sahlins 1999: 416).

From the start, Boas' students disagreed amongst themselves about the extent to which culture could be presented as a matter of standardized patterns and there is no doubt that it was the desire to shape the concept in a

way that was accessible to a wide audience that led Benedict to present it in a manner that some of her peers found to be dangerously oversimplified. The tension between shaping a conceptual tool that is useful for public engagement on the one hand, and avoiding oversimplification on the other, has been inherent from the start, but it is a tension that for all of its potential pitfalls has proved to be remarkably fruitful.

Negotiating simplicity and complexity

Catherine Besteman and Hugh Gusterson have made an important intervention in this debate with their book *Why America's top pundits are wrong: Anthropologists talk back* (2005) and yet this attempt to broaden anthropology's reach has elicited criticism. Matti Bunzl argues that the book's contention that America's top pundits are 'dangerously simplistic' (Besteman & Gusterson 2005: 2) is symptomatic of how anthropology is excessively frightened of generalization, much as many years earlier, Mary Douglas (1970: 64) famously observed that simply and repeatedly observing how a particular generalization, 'doesn't apply to the Bongo Bongo', is not a fruitful path for the discipline to follow. He suggests that in condemning pundits for simplifying reality, Besteman and Gusterson's project is a retreat to the portraits of complexity and fragmentation that have isolated anthropology and made it all but unreadable by other scholars, let alone the wider public. Bunzl argues that the pendulum needs to swing away from 'particularism' (2008: 64) if anthropologists are to be able to have any kind of role as public intellectuals. Of course such a swing away from 'particularism', whilst potentially opening the door to wider mass influence, hints at accepting simplifications that do not do justice to the rich complexity of human life.

Yet, as Besteman and Gusterson forcefully argue, walking this tightrope and engaging with detailed social realities as opposed to an 'opposition to generalization' (2005: 63) is crucial to anthropological work. Indeed, acknowledging the danger of oversimplification rather than avoiding it, whether through the retreat into a 'butterfly collecting' singular emphasis on the minutiae of particular social lives or the equally comforting retreat into ever greater philosophical abstraction, remains key, not only in connecting to a wider audience, but also to the genuine theoretical advances that attempting to engage with important social issues on our own terms can bring us. The history of anthropological theory demonstrates that some of its most important contributions have tended to arise as a result of its proponents' desire to engage in such debates, whilst remaining sensitive to the danger of their work being oversimplified and taken out of context.

There is little doubt that the 'culture concept', particularly in its most simplified forms, has proved itself to be as useful a tool for those fighting to preserve the status quo as it has for its opponents. So both Benedict and Mead, whilst viewing themselves as enemies of many of the values central to the maintenance of particular forms of US power, put their skills at the service of that very power during World War II. Benedict's book *The chrysanthemum and the sword* was commissioned by the US army as part of the war effort against Japan, whilst Mead spent time working for the UK Ministry of Information and the US Office of War Information, helping to prevent cultural misunderstandings between US GIs and local residents. Of course, such uses of cultural relativism in the interests of US power will be acceptable to many,

given the nature of that particular conflict. But they do run counter to Boas' reluctance for anthropology to be used in the service of US (or any other) military power; their wartime engagement can perhaps in this sense be seen as setting a precedent for anthropologists being embedded in US army units in Iraq or Afghanistan, a situation that evokes profound disquiet in the discipline.

Simple models of cultural difference continue to be of use for people with very different political projects in other areas as well. Whilst models of cultural difference are often used by those fighting against the power of corporations, such as those speaking on behalf of indigenous peoples, they can just as easily be mobilized by those seeking to make those same organizations run more effectively. For example, the management consultant and Professor of Organizational Anthropology, Geert Hofstede (2001), uses Benedict's text from the 1930s as the basis for his explanation of the culture concept to business leaders in his multi-million selling *Culture's consequences*; a book designed to help corporations run better and maximize profits by managing and marketing across cultural borders more effectively.

Gifting as political intervention

And culture is far from being the only major theoretical advance in anthropology that was forged in the crucible of a desire for social engagement instead of a quest to purify ourselves from its contamination. For example, Mauss' famous essay on the gift was written as conscious intervention in a political debate over the limits of market morality, as is made clear in his reflections on the role of reciprocity in modern societies in the final chapter (Mauss 2002: 83-107) and has also been stressed in many recent returns to the essay (e.g. Godelier 1999: 4; Graeber 2001: 156-8; Hart 2007: 473). In common with the political intervention of the 'culture concept' that has been used in a variety of ways that its proponents might have rejected, Mauss' 'social democratic' (Godelier ibid.) vision of gift morality has been taken up in ways that he might not have expected. So for example, ideas of a 'gift economy' clearly derived from Mauss, underpin much of the thinking of David Halpern, the leader of the current British government's 'Behavioural Insight Unit', better known as the 'Nudge Team', and one of the chief architects of Prime Minister David Cameron's 'Big Society', in which ideas of gifting and reciprocity taken indirectly from Mauss play a central part in creating a social fabric that will step in as the state steps back (see for example Halpern 2010, n.d).

An example from the opposite end of the political spectrum is provided by the Situationist International, a small group of anarcho-Marxists active in Paris in the 1960s, who were hugely influenced by anthropological theories of exchange and in particular Mauss' essay on the gift. They attempted to subvert the commodification of information by recontextualizing news stories and then circulating them as gifts in a magazine entitled '*Potlatch*', and encouraged the theft and destruction of commodities in situations such as riots as the reassertion of human control over commodified products of human labour, using arguments clearly derived from Mauss' essay (see Martin 2012).

The Situationists have gone on to have significant influence on cultural politics in the decades since their collapse (Barnard 2004; Savova 2009;

Graeber 2011), but what is less often noted is the ways in which their reading of the theoretical potential of Mauss' essay was in many ways more innovative than that within academic anthropology, precisely because of their desire to use gift theory as a tool for revolutionary social transformation rather than despite it. Although not well known among many anthropologists, their work proved immensely influential in diverse con- texts from the May 1968 events in France, through the UK punk rock scene of the late 1970s, up to contemporary anti-corporate social movements such as the Alterglobalization Movement (Maeckelbergh 2009), bringing gift theory to a variety of wider audiences.

The productive relationship between social engagement and the elaboration of anthropological theory has continued to be significant since the 1960s. For example, following Dell Hymes' *Reinventing anthropology* (1972), anthropological research began to consider 'studying- up' to explore the sociocultural construction of the social fields of those with power in society. This desire to engage in understanding the shifting nature of political inequalities directly led to the development and refinement of theories of the culture of power, and not just the culture of the dominated (Nader 1972). Various sub-fields focused on 'applied anthropology' have also made important contributions to theory. Engagements with environmental policy have furthered understandings of individual versus collective articulations of consciousness (Colchester 2002), urban anthropology's desire to engage policymakers have shed new light on theories of spatial segregation and social discrimination (Low 1999) and critical medical anthropology through engagement with community health has foregrounded theoretical questions of materialization, contributing to feminist and queer studies (Cohen 1998).

Further, in more recent years, Jeffrey Juris' desire to make sense of the networked spaces of contemporary social movements through an 'engaged ethnography' (Juris & Khasnabish 2013) has directly contributed to theoretical advances in understanding the logic of networking and aggregation – to provide just a few examples of many that we could have chosen. Indeed, some of the most highly complex and significant contributions to anthropological theory in recent decades are actually revealed on closer examination to be inspired at least in part by an engagement with pressing social issues. Marilyn Strathern's (1988) deconstruction of the individual/society dichotomy that has underpinned so much of Western social theory was partly built upon new understandings of the ways in which migrants from the Highlands of New Guinea valued and denigrated particular kinds of social relationships in different contexts in the course of work that tried to make sense of some of the social problems faced by those migrants in the new settlements of the growing city of Port Moresby (Strathern, personal correspondence).

These examples point to how anthropologists have made direct contributions to theory by entering into the challenging spaces of socially engaged work and facing up to the attendant difficulties of oversimplification and unknown politicized outcomes. The elaboration of the culture concept opened a complex pathway that attempted to negotiate these tensions and the more recent examples that we have cited have built on this legacy. It was precisely through having the courage to try to engage in the social world whilst being true to its complexities that led that earlier generation of

anthropologists to develop a concept of such undoubted influence, that both said something important about the world in which they lived and also shaped it in a variety of ways.

Their attempts were of course problematic, but what these attempts and the work of subsequent generations demonstrate is that whilst the fear of oversimplification and 'impact' on the one hand and theoretical elaboration on the other, are often in tension, this is not a zero-sum game. Indeed the contributions of the kind of anthropological work we have briefly highlighted here, both politically and theoretically, suggest the precise opposite; that it is only when this tension is treated as a creative one that either half of the dichotomy can be advanced successfully.

Evidently the type of socially engaged anthropological theory put forward in the 1930s cannot simply be recreated today, either in terms of the kinds of theoretical approaches that we put forward or the means that we use to advance our case. To the popular books and magazine articles that Mead and Benedict were noted for, we can add the web- site and the press release. The very nature of 'the public' as a singular mass to be addressed through mass media has changed and today perhaps it is more useful to think of multiple overlapping publics that anthropologists can engage with and address through a multiplicity of media and methods (cf. Warner 2002). Indeed, due to much diversified channels of information, much of the engaged work that is conducted today goes under the radar com- pared to the impact of figures such as Benedict and Mead with their mass circulated books, magazine articles and radio broadcasts.

Anthropological interventions today

But there is still a role for intervention into public debates through mass media of communication such as the popular book *Freakonomics* (Levitt & Dubner 2007), a popularization of Chicago School-style neoclassical economic theories which has sold millions of copies globally and is in many respects a *Patterns of culture* for the neoliberal age. And yet anthropologists still have the capacity to make such significant interventions in public debates around the role of economic institutions in public life, as evidenced for example in the work of Gillian Tett. Trained as a social anthropologist and writing as a columnist for the *Financial Times*, Tett predicted the global financial crisis of 2008 two years before the markets collapsed. Her theorization of spaces of silence allowed her to go beyond the silo mentality of a fragmented market, here premised on collateralized debt obligation and credit default swaps, and there on mergers and acquisitions.

However, it is noticeable that Tett's influence premised on anthropological theory has come from a position out- side of the academy, as opposed to Mead and Benedict, who were able to combine being taken seriously as theoretical innovators within the academy with the kind of engagement with a mass audience that Tett demonstrates is still possible. Perhaps this is partly because of structural conditions within the academy.

Any debate around engagement must take into account, as Besteman and Gusterson note, that 'the reward structure of the contemporary neoliberal academy grants tenure, pro- motions, and pay raises for academic books and refereed articles and disdains those who write for a popular audience' (2008: 62), although it is worth noting that Mead herself was forced, as Besteman

and Gusterson observe, to 'build a career in the interstices of academia and public life' (ibid.).

Although their political projects are very different, like Mead, Graeber has both reached a wider audience than most academic anthropologists, and been able to develop theoretical understandings of issues such as debt and value, in no small part due to his desire to engage with debates of contemporary social importance. And whilst Graeber and Tett's politics are undoubtedly very different in many respects, they both demonstrate an ability to develop the discipline theoretically in different directions by virtue of an active engagement with similar issues.

And this is the lesson that we can perhaps learn from the history of the discipline from Boas onwards: that we do not need to rigidly prescribe the political outcomes of our interventions. Indeed, they often escape our control. But it is the case that much of the most important innovation in our theory derives from a desire to deal with the messy complexities of such engagements rather than from a desire to insulate ourselves and our theories from such processes. The elaboration of anthropological theory, through a commitment to engaging with issues that concern a wide audience, remains as possible and as vital today as it has always been.

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